

# (The Challenge of Missions) 1. THE LAST HANDFUL

by A.B. Simpson

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## Transcript

"Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go, and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. And she went, and did according to the saying of Elijah; and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah" (1 Kings 17: 13-16). The darkest hour of Israel's sin was marked by the advent of the greatest of Israel's prophets. As men place their best lighthouses on the most dangerous coasts, so where sin abounds, there God's grace doth much more abound. Elijah represents the ministers of God and the messengers of heaven in every age. Like a flaming star he had flashed across the reign of the wicked Ahab and had hurled in his face the awful message of judgment, "As the Lord God liveth, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." And then as suddenly as the meteor vanishes he had passed out of sight and the angry and distracted king sought for him in vain over all the land. But God was taking care of His servant. Away up on the banks of the Jordan, and perhaps on the border of the land of Gilead, his own country, the prophet was safely hid by the brook Cherith, and the ravens were bringing him morning and evening his daily portion of bread, while he drank of the water of the flowing brook.

But soon even the little mountain brook dried up and the prophet must look elsewhere for his support. And so the command comes to him, "Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there; behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee." And across the breadth of the land he takes his journey and enters at eventide the gates of the little city. Just at this moment his hostess comes out to gather a few sticks to prepare the last meal for her-self and her little son, for the famine had sorely stricken this land also, and there was neither bread nor water except of the scantiest measure. At the word of the Lord the prophet accosts her, "Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." and as she went to fetch, he called again as though the Lord would gradually and gently prepare her mind for the great test that He was bringing. "Bring me also, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand." Then it was that her spirit broke. The water she would spare, but the bread was too much as yet for her hospitality to venture. How pathetic the cry of her distress, "As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but a handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Then comes the mighty message of faith, "Fear not; go, and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto

me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal sha not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth." How simple and sublime the story and the sequel. "And sh went, and did according to the saying of Elijah; and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days," or a the margin says, a full year, "and the barrel of mea wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah."

What has this beautiful ancient picture to do with missions?

I. We have here a beautiful picture of fellowship in service and missionary work. Elijah represents the missionary and this widow his supporter. For a whole year this humble and destitute woman supported a missionary all alone to show us what faith can still do through us in the Master's work. The work of missions is mutual. God intends that the two sides of it shall always be jointly maintained. It is not a matter for the independent worker who takes a notion to go to some distant field and preach the Gospel, but it is just as much the responsibility of you and me at home, if we cannot go, to stand back of some one else who can. And therefore the first missionaries were sent forth from Antioch while the church at Antioch stood behind them, commending them to the grace of God, welcoming them back and then sending them forth again. God might just as well have still continued to support Elijah by the ravens of the wilderness, but He wanted to establish this precedent and leave this pattern for other workers in all the coming ages. He might still send an army of angels to proclaim His message to the world, or supply the needs of those who do it, but He has chosen to make His people partners in this glorious trust. "One soweth, another reapeth." One scatters the seed with diligent hands while another acts as willing feet to carry the sower wherever he may go. You can still be as truly a missionary as the man you support in Africa or China, and when the day of recompense shall come, the sower and the reaper shall rejoice together, and you shall have your part as well as he.

II. Further we learn that God loves to use the humble and the poor as His chosen instruments of highest service. He did not send Elijah to be the guest of Obadiah, the wealthy and noble cabinet minister of Ahab who was his loyal friend, and who could have cared for him without the slightest sacrifice. But He sent him to a poor widow in the heathen country of Sidon. We sometimes wonder why God does not lead the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts to give their millions to God for the world's evangelization, but instead He seems to be dependent upon "a poor and despised company" of obscure people like ourselves and most of those who are sustaining the work of missions today. The truth is, God never has cared to lean upon the rich, the great, the wise or the strong, lest men should claim the glory. This is no mere accident, but the rule in the Kingdom of God. "Ye see your calling, brethren," the apostle says, "how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty are called," but God hath chosen "the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him." So the founders of Christianity were the poor fishermen of Galilee. The first testimony of the leading apostle was, "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk." One of the old saints well said, "When the church ceased to say, silver and gold have I none, she also ceased to say, in the Name of Jesus of Nazareth rise up and walk." The pioneers of modern missions were poor people. It was a lot of humble peasants, without influence or money, who led Zinzendorf to form the great Moravian missionary society, and to begin the most glorious work of modern times. Today a great proportion of the missionary money of the Church comes from people like the widow of Zarephath. Do not, therefore, excuse yourself from the responsibility or be discouraged in your efforts, because you are humble and poor. God is simply asking the five barley loaves and two fishes, the two mites that make a farthing, the thing that is "in thine hand," and His power will make it "mighty to the pulling down of

strongholds."

III. Next we learn the place of sacrifice in the service of God. Already this woman had drunk of the cup of sorrow. She was a widow, she was poor and she had a little fatherless child dependent on her. She had even come to the uttermost straits and already had seen the bottom of the meal barrel and was gathering just two little sticks with which to make a flash of fire to bake a few grains that still remained and taste once more with her little son the sweet taste of food, and then lie down and die of starvation. And it is this woman from whom God asks the last handful of meal and the uttermost sacrifice of which she was capable. The reason He asks such sacrifices is because He wants us first, and sacrifice is the only test of self-surrender. "Make first a cake for me," is the touchstone of all consecration. It is God first and last and all in all. Beloved, is this your consecration? This is the Divine standard for all that will ever pass current in the world above. Abraham must give up his Isaac, Moses must give up his crown. Hannah must give up her boy. The widow must leave her life and her child's life at the mercy of Elijah's God and surrender the last link between them and every human possibility of escape from death.

Why does a loving father call for such sacrifices? Simply because His own love has made a greater sacrifice and He knows that we never can be partners in that kingdom of which love is the keynote and the fundamental law unless we too have learned the same great secret of love. The Kingdom of Christ is the kingdom of love, just as the kingdoms of earth are realms of selfishness and ruled by self-love. Men live for what they can get out of one another, and a good many Christians seem to think the business of religion is to get all they can out of God. But we do not belong to the kingdom of heaven until we become partakers of the Divine nature, and that is love. The sacrifice of Calvary was never offered to purchase at such tremendous cost for selfish, ease-loving men and women a cheap reprieve from punishment, a release from all sacrifice, and a Divine indulgence to go on living for self-gratification. We have not truly come into Christ's atonement until the spirit of that cross has been repeated in our lives and we have learned to say, "We thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again."

Beloved, is there any such cross as that in your life? I do not mean the cross where He died for you, but where you have died with Him; some hour of self-renunciation, some conflict with the flesh and the heart that almost crushed you, some place where you laid down an idol, or gave up an ambition, or renounced a bright and alluring future and went forth with Him, saying:

"Jesus, I my cross have taken All to leave and follow Thee." And a sweet undertone seemed to whisper in your heart for many a day,

"Now I know thou lovest me." IV. We learn further that the true secret of every sacrifice and service is faith. Not without a promise from the prophet could she have ventured on this surrender. God did not ask her to give up one world without offering to her another. He is too faith-ful to demand of us a blind surrender. Even Abraham's mighty sacrifice was not made in blank despair, but in living faith. He gave up Isaac, "accounting that God was able to raise him up even from the dead." A sister once told me that she had been trying desperately for months to be so surrendered to the Lord that she was willing to be lost for Christ's sake. No wonder she failed. God asks us to give ourselves up, not to an executioner, but to a father's arms, because He has much more to give us in return.

When Richard Cecil wished to teach his little daughter the meaning of consecration and faith, he took her on his knee in his library one day and asked her if she loved him well enough to give up a little necklace of

glass beads which she greatly prized. She looked up with tears in her face, and sobbed, "Yes, papa." "Well," said he, "you take them off and throw them into the grate." With heaving bosom and hesitating steps, she made the great renunciation and then flew back to his arms and sobbed herself to rest, while he patted the little golden head and gently said, "Now papa knows you love him." Nothing more was said for several days, but on her birthday her father called her to him, and, opening a little casket, handed to her a chain of real pearls and asked her to put them on her neck as the gift of his love to her, She looked him full in the face and then a great light broke upon her countenance, and again throwing herself on his bosom, she cried, "Oh, papa, forgive me; I did not understand, but now I do."

That is the consecration God loves and loves to recompense. Our sacrifices are real investments that will bring us infinite returns in that day when He shall give us diadems for tears, cities for pounds and ten thousand per cent compound interest on all we have laid down for His sake. The poor widow made no mistake in investing a little handful of meal for thrice three hundred and sixty-five good meals. The farmer who throws away a lot of good grain in the furrowed field may seem to his thoughtless child to be a great waster, but when the golden harvest comes and gives him back some sixty and some an hundredfold, then the little one will understand.

We shall give to God just in proportion to our confidence in Him. We shall put our money into His cause just so far as we believe it is the best cause in the world. We are doing this already or failing to do it and our lives are telling the story of our faith. Shall we hear Him calling to us and saying, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it?"

The story is told of a selfish and stingy elder in the Church of God who had refused to give anything in the offering for missions and had told the collector that he would be much obliged if she would not call upon him again. That night he had a dream, and in his dream the Lord seemed to be discussing this matter with him. "John," the voice seemed to say, "have you ever asked me for anything?" "Oh, yes," he answered, "I have asked you for something every day and I could not get on without continually asking for needed blessings." "How is it, then," said the voice, "that I asked you today for something and you refused Me? Now," the Lord continued, "what have you got from Me in all these years? Do you remember asking Me once to forgive your sins and save your soul, and I gave you what you asked?" "Yes," was the answer. "Do you remember asking Me a great many times to forgive your faults and later sins and restore you to My peace and favor, and did I not always answer you?" "Yes," was the reply. "Did you not ask Me to prosper you in your business and I gave you good crops and a splendid farm, and enabled you to lay up a lot of money in the bank?" "Yes," still came the answer. "Do you remember once when you were ill and given up to die and you pleaded with Me for your life and I gave it back to you and raised you up again and have kept you in health until this day?" "Yes," sobbed out the farmer. "Did you not ask Me to bless your home and I gave you a loving wife and sons and daughters and have kept them from going astray and have made them a joy and comfort to you?" "Oh, yes," groaned out the farmer. "Well, now," said the Lord, "all this must be changed from this day and we shall simply understand each other; that I am never to ask you again for anything and you are never to ask Me for anything." "Oh, no, Lord," cried out the farmer; "forgive me, I cannot do without Thee and I gladly acknowledge that I and all I have are Thine and shall give to Thee as Thou hast given to me."

V. The blessing that came through this act of faith and sacrifice. First, her own supplies were multiplied, her own needs were met, her life was saved, her child was fed and all her future was guarded and blessed

by Him whom she had obeyed and trusted.

In the next place, she was used to perform a great and noble service. She became the instrument of God in keeping His prophet. She actually supported a missionary for twelve months out of a single handful of meal, and thus was made a fellow-worker with the greatest of the prophets and her name enrolled in the annals of eternity among the witnesses of faith and the servants of the Lord. What a glorious return for one little act of faith and love. How like the little lad who gave his loaves and fishes to feed the multitudes and got back his own dinner and twelve basketsful of fragments. In this connection God continually reminds us in His Word that we may expect His rich temporal blessing when we deal bountifully with Him. It is with reference to giving of our means to God that He says, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work." "Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: so that thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine."

VI. This woman's act of faith and love was but a steppingstone to a higher experience and a greater blessing. This was not the end of it by any means. A few months passed and lo, a great sorrow came to that happy home. Her loved boy was stricken with deadly sickness and in a few hours lay cold and lifeless in his mother's arms. And then there came back to her the remembrance of a life of sin and she burst forth with a bitter cry before the man of God, "What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?" How little we know when we are obeying the Spirit's voice in some solemn hour like this, how soon some tremendous need for God is going to come into our lives and that in His farseeing mercy God is just preparing us now by this very act of faith to trust Him then for something higher and harder. How glad she was an hour later when that loved son was given to her joyful embrace that she had not said "No" to God when He first had called her. It is not that God deals with us on the principle of bargain and sale, giving us His blessings because we have earned them, but it is forever true that the hearts that hearken when He calls and learn to obey in quick response, are the people that shall be able to go with confidence to Him when the great emergencies of life come. Our hearts would faint and fail were we not able to claim Him as our present help in time of trouble. In contrast with this, how dreadful that other picture of the selfish worldling who refuses to listen to the call of God and some day himself shall call on God in vain. Listen, "If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?"

VII. Finally, the Lord has been pleased to give this act of faith and love an everlasting memorial. It is not a little remarkable that in our Saviour's first sermon on earth in the synagogue at Nazareth, recorded in the fourth chapter of Luke, He should call special attention to this very case. In speaking of the work of Elijah this is the only incident that He mentions. "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, but to none of them was he sent but to Sarepta, a city of Sidon. unto a woman that was a widow." Why should He make mention of this very case? Perhaps for the same reason that He Himself has told us, wherever this Gospel is preached, to tell of the love of Mary of Bethany in anointing Him for burial. It was no chance occurrence that the prophet should meet this woman. God had chosen her to be the instrument of blessing and service, and the Lord Jesus puts His own emphatic seal upon that divine choice. Beloved, when God comes to you with some special opportunity of holy service, it is a high and heavenly calling for which you will forever thank and bless Him unless you are foolish enough to neglect and refuse it. So He is coming to you today in these last and closing days of time and condescending to give you some noble part

in the most glorious enterprise in all the annals of all the ages, a part in the bringing back of the King of kings and the establishment of His kingdom in the earth. What though you be poor and little known? He is rich enough and great enough to take your humble gift and multiply it a millionfold and to be pleased with your loving sacrifice and reward it some day with a crown of glory that fadeth not away. It is not the Christian and Missionary Alliance that is calling for your help. It is not a case of charity, humanity, or conventional religious work. It is the Lord Jesus who hath need of you and is saying to some of His missionaries, "I have commanded a widow to sustain thee." Shall we be true to our heavenly calling and some day hear Him say, "Ye did it unto me?"

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